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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to lay a general framework for analyzing credibility gaps in evaluative information at various levels of organizational structure. The CIPP model is chosen as a point of reference in order to identify the type of evaluative information to which the concern of this paper is addressed. Credibility gaps are classified as personnel related and organization related. The latter, an Organizational Credibility Gap, exists at each organizational level where the same person is both accountable for a program's success or failure and responsible for the formal evaluation of that program. Three characteristics of such gaps are: (1) They are basically a "conflict of interests" relationship between the organizational roles; (2) They are separate from personalities as such; and (3) The essence of these gaps is that of potential incredulity. Four propositions which may serve as guidelines in the institutionalization of evaluation functions in educational institutions are: (1) Gaps can be delineated in a project's planning stages; (2) Gaps should be minimized; (3) The bridging of each gap should be planned; and (4) The strategy of internal evaluation with external audit provides the balanced use of resources for a long-range development and institutionalization of evaluation functions in educational institutions. A combination of the propositions supports an overall strategy that would support the long-range buildup of in house evaluation capabilities of educational institutions. (CK)

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THE CREDIBILITY GAP BETWEEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND FUNDING AGENCIES

A Paper Prepared for 1972 AERA
Division H Symposium, "Funding and
Contractual Issues in School System Evaluation"

by

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Accountability seems to be the key concept that focuses the issue implied by the title of this paper. The problems of the credibility of evaluative information passed from a funded project to this funding agency is a critical issue as far as funding agencies are concerned, but it is also a critical issue for the funded agency. Much of this paper is an effort to lay a general framework for analyzing credibility gaps in evaluative information at various levels of organizational structure. It is hoped that the general framework will provide a better way of looking at the more specific kind of credibility gap implied by the title of the paper.

The CIPP model is chosen as a point of reference in order to identify the type of evaluative information to which the concerns of this paper are addressed (Stufflebeam, et.al., 1971). Within the framework

of the CIPP model, product evaluation is the type of evaluative information of primary concern in this paper, although the credibility gap between public schools and funding agencies, such as in reported results of needs assessment, availability of resources, implementation of planned strategies which would be specific examples of other types of evaluative information in the CIPP model, may also justifibly fall under the credibility gap concerns delineated in this paper.

If credibility gaps may be classified by the sources which engender them, one major category would be personnel related. Such credibility gaps would be engendered by doubts as to the technical competence or personal honesty of the personnel providing the evaluative information. This category has to do directly with the perceived nature of the persons who are functioning in organizational roles.

Another major category of credibility gaps would be those which are organization related. This category has to do with the organizational roles in which persons function rather than to the persons themselves.

Since this type of credibility gap is germane to the manner of institutionalization of the evaluation functions, it may be termed an organizational credibility gap. The simple criterion for determining the existence of such a gap may be stated as follows: An organizational credibility gap exists at each and every organizational level where the same person is both accountable for the success or failure of a program or project and responsible for the formal evaluation of that program or project.

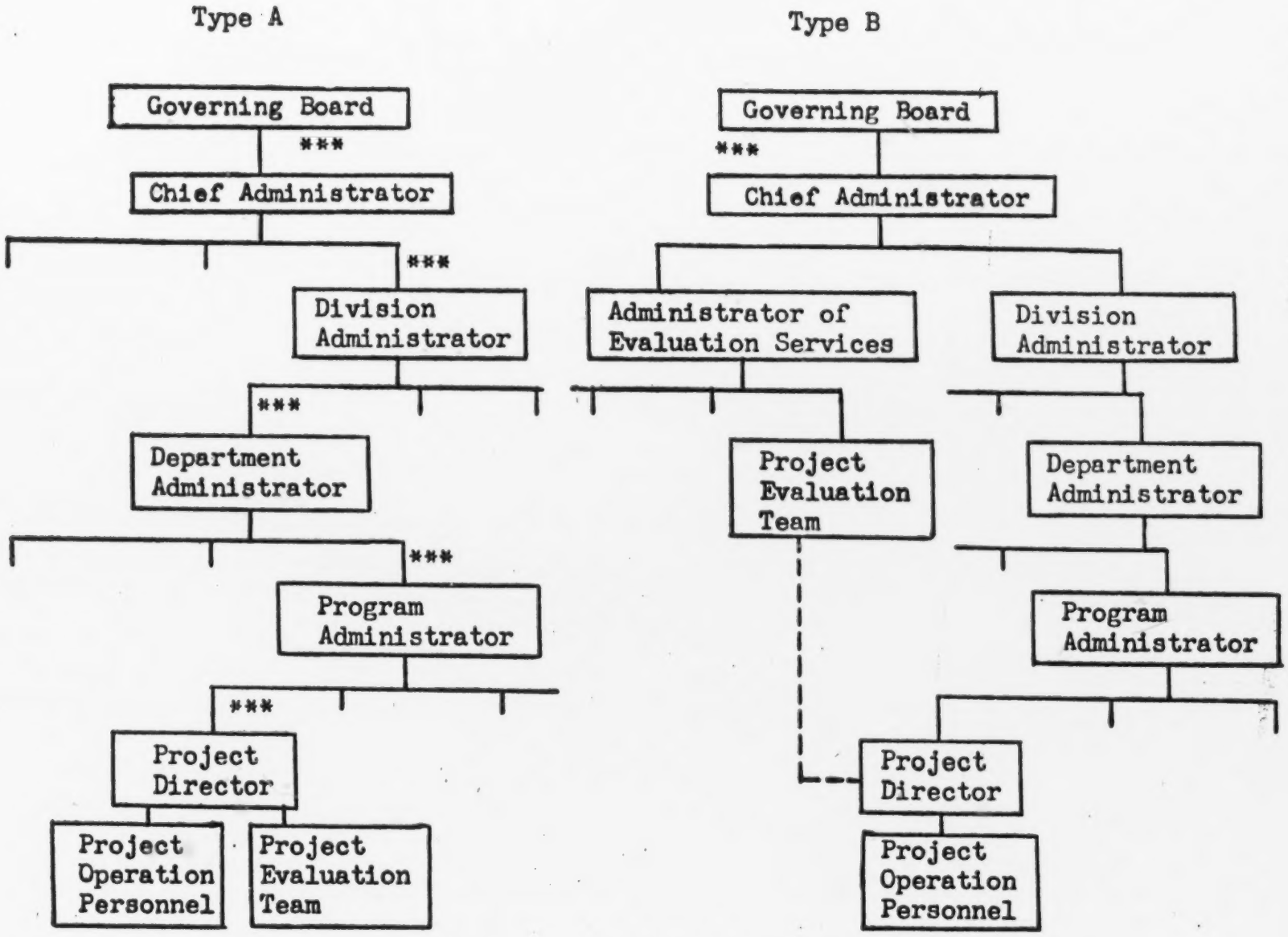
Organizational credibility gaps are basically a "conflict of interests" relationship between the organizational roles. Several important characteristics of organizational credibilty gaps as thus defined should be kept in mind. First, there may be a multiplicity of such gaps in the "chain-of-command" of any given program or project. For instance, if the responsibility for evaluation of a project is merged with the chain-of-command responsibilty at the project director level, every level of the chain-of-command up to the top level of the organizational structure yields an organizational credibility gap.

A second characteristic of organizational credibility gaps is that their existence is completely separate from personalities as such. An organizational credibility gap is a characteristic of the organizational structure and exists when the criterion applies, regardless of the persons performing in organizational roles. Therefore, when an organizational credibility gap is delineated no implication of dishonesty or other personal characteristic is meant in relation to any personality acutally performing in organizational roles.

A third characteristic of organizational credibility gaps is that their essence is that of potential incredulity rather than actual incredulity. With respect to a given report of evaluative information, formal or informal, incredulity may not be in fact attached to the report by some administrative level in spite of the existence of organizational credibility gaps. An occasion for doubt exists, however, in the inherent "conflict of interests" situation of the organizational roles.

Figure 1 provides a comparative illustration of placement of project evaluation functions within an educational institution. In both examples (Types A and B) the immediate management of the project is five administrative echelons removed from the governing board, and the "chain-of-command" structure is identical with respect to project operations. There is a substantial contrast between the two types, however, in the number of organizational credibility gaps created. This substantial difference is solely the function of organizational placement of the evaluation functions. In Type A, the project evaluation team is assigned to, and under the direct control of the project director. According to the criterion of an organizational credibility gap described above, an organizational credibility gap is thus created at the level of the project director. Since every administrative echelon above the project director in the chain-of-command is also responsible for the success of the project as well as for control of the project evaluation team, the criterian shows that four other organizational credibility gaps are also created by the merging of project control and evaluation at this level.

In the Type B method of institutionalizing the project evaluation functions, the project evaluation team is assigned to provide evaluative information on the same project, indicated by the dotted line, but is under the administrative control of an administrator of evaluation services not in the project chain-of-command. This administrator reports directly to, and is directly under the administrative control of, the chief administrator



***Organizational credibility gap regarding evaluative information.

Figure 1.---Illustration of organizational credibility gaps created by two alternate forms of institutionalizing the evaluation functions. Titles designate roles but may not necessarily be the actual title of administrative personnel filling the roles.

(superintendent, agency head, college president, etc.) of the educational position where the criterion for an organizational credibility gap applies. Therefore, an organizational credibility gap exists only between the chief administrator and the governing board.

From the perspective of the chief administrator in Type B no organizational credibility gaps are built into the flow of project evaluative information that comes to his desk; whereas in Type A he must recognize that the evaluative information has had to flow through four organizational credibility gaps before it reaches his deak. This does not necessarily of itself mean that the evaluative information is inaccurate, censored, or otherwise slanted to make the project look better than it is, but the risks of such being the case are greater.

Figure 2 is an abbreviated organizational chart in a large city school district with reference to some of its operating programs and projects for which extensive evaluation was designed and implemented.[1] It provides a convenient example of several key issues and problems related to organizational credibility gaps.

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[1]The organizational chart is based on operations in the Dallas Independent School District in 1969 through 1971. The structure of different programs and projects within the organization was in considerable flux through this period of time. The chart presented in Figure 2, therefore, is an attempt to illustrate some of the various organizational relationships that existed during the period but is not necessarily completely accurate with respect to any one point of time in that period. During this period the author served as the Assistant Superintendent for Planning, Research, and Evaluation. The Dallas Independent School District encompasses most of the area of the eighth largest city in the nation by population (1970 census) and stands in about the midrange of the twenty or thirty largest school districts in the nation.

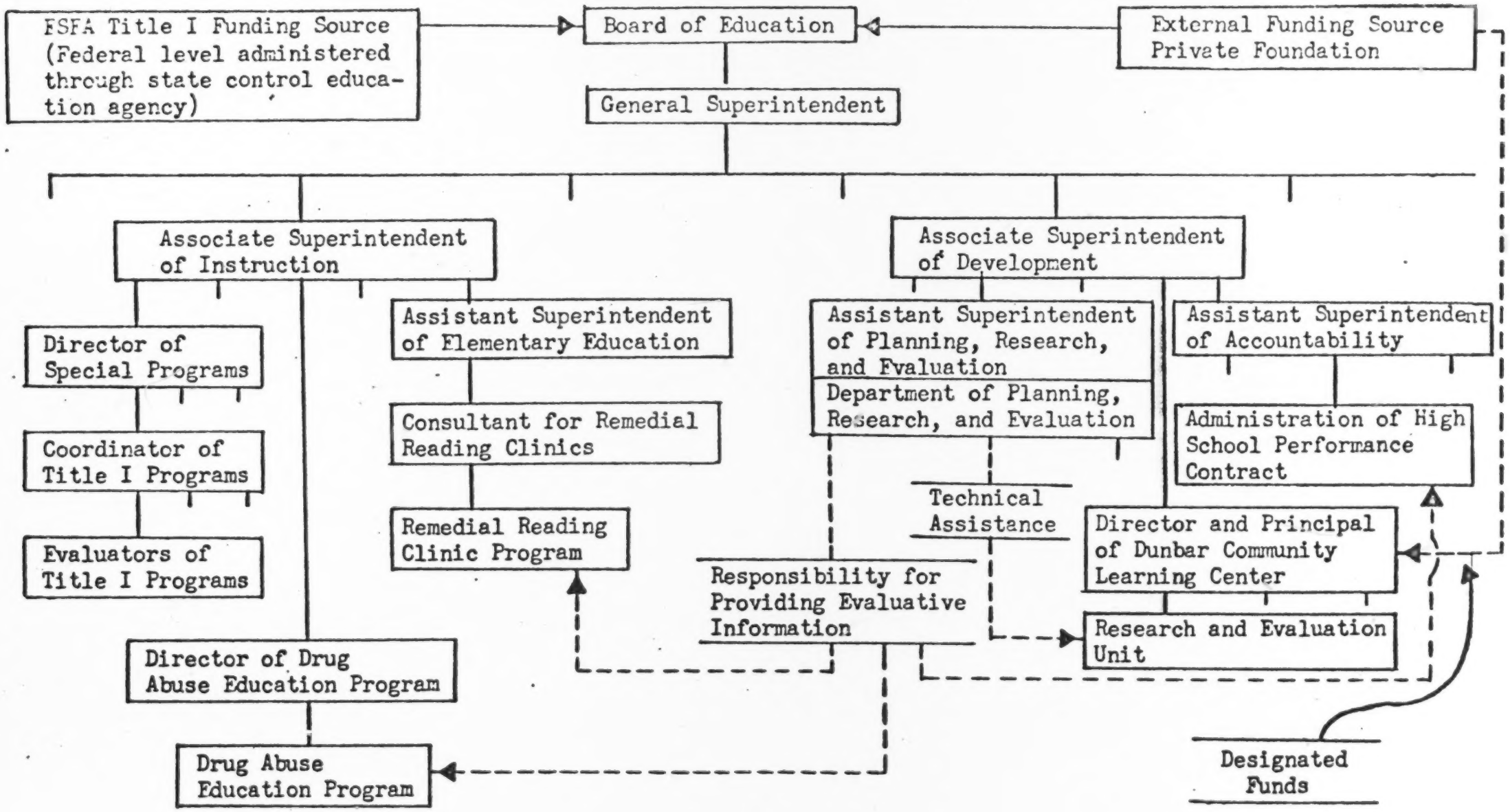
FSFA Title I Funding Source (Federal level administered through state control education agency)
Board of Education
External Funding Source Private Foundation
General Superintendent
Associate Superintendent of Instruction
Director of Special Programs
Coordinator of Title I Programs
Evaluators of Title I Programs
Director of Drug Abuse Education Program
Drug Abuse Education Program
Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education
Consultant for Remedial Reading Clinics
Remedial Reading Clinic Program
Associate Superintendent of Development
Assistant Superintendent of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Department of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Technical Assistance
Responsibility for Providing Evaluative Information
Assistant Superintendent of Accountability
Administration of High School Performance Contract
Director and Principal of Dunbar Community Learning Center
Research and Evaluation Unit
Designated Funds

Figure 2.—Example of various placement of project/program evaluation functions in a large city school district.

The organizational chart in Figure 2 illustrates various strategies for institutionalizing the evaluation functions. Until 1969, evaluation functions were primarily performed in the line of the chain-of-command, except for a system-wide achievement testing program which was centrally administered. In 1969, a new research and evaluation strategy was introduced into the system. The strategy was to upgrade "in-house" educational research and evaluation expertise in the system and to concentrate this expertise in a Department of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.

Two primary objectives underlay the adoption of the new strategy: (1) to increase technical competence of the system to conduct educational evaluation and (2) to increase separation between project/program operations and project/program evaluation. The strategy was not immediately, uniformly implemented, however. It was initially applied to specially funded projects, high interest projects and programs, and a few projects and programs where project and program managers voluntarily sought technical assistance from the newly formed department or volunteered to relinquish evaluation functions to that department. In short, it was a transition period and, thus, illustrates a comingling of the new and residual strategies.

The placement of evaluation of the ESEA Title I program illustrated in Figure 2 created four organizational credibility gaps within the system: coordinator to director to associate superintendent to general superintendent to board of education. On the other hand, placement of the evaluation functions for ESEA Title I programs under the Department of

Planning, Research, and Evaluation would have left only one organizational credibility gap within the system: general superintendent to board of education.

When a new drug abuse education program was inaugurated, the responsibility for designing and implementing the evaluation of the program was assigned to the Department of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. Such an arrangement minimized the organizational credibility gaps by leaving only one: general superintendent to board of education. Although the Assistant Superintendent of Planning, Research, and Evaluation did not report directly to the General Superintendent, but rather to the Associate Superintendent of Development, no organizational credibility gaps were created by this layering of administrative echelons because the Associate Superintendent of Development was not in a chain-of-command role in the drug abuse education program.

The situation was different, however, for projects under the control of the Associate Superintendent of Development. As may be seen from the organizational chart in Figure 2, application of the criterion for an organizational credibility gap would delineate an additional organizational credibility gap at the level of the Associate Superintendent for Development for all such projects. For instance, the high school performance contract, which involved two contractors external to the system, was administered by the Assistant Superintendent for Accountability. Responsibility for implementing the evaluation design was assigned to the

Department of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. From the perspective of the Associate Superintendent of Development, all organizational credibility gaps regarding the evaluative information coming to his desk were eliminated by this arrangement. However, from the perspective of the General Superintendent, an organizational credibility gap existed with regard to scuh information, and from the perspective of the Board of Education two such gaps existed.

Another project in the Division of Development involved additional complexities. This was the Dunbar Community Learning Center, which was a developmental site for development and/or piloting of various learning systems. On the upper side of the complexity continuum was an external private foundation providing substantial funds for the projects in the Center. On the lower end of the continuum was the creation of a research and evaluation unit which was subject to chain-of-command control at the center level. This unit received technical assistance from the Department of Planning, Research, and Evaluation but was not under the administrative supervision of that department. Thus, another organizational credibility gap was created, i.e., Center level to level of Associate Superintendent of Development. From the perspective of the Associate Superintendent of Development, one organizational credibility gap existed with respect to evaluation information supplied by the Center's research and evaluation unit: at the level of General Superintendent, two such gaps; at the level of the Board of Education three such gaps; and at the level of the external funding agency four such gaps.

So far, the consideration of organizational credibility gaps has been focused on gaps within a single institutional structure. Such credibility gaps are not solely a matter of internal concern. They are of concern not only to the chief administrator, but also to levels, agencies, funding sources, publics, and so forth above and beyond the chief administrator. Those starategies which would tend to remove doubts about the quality of evaluative information at any level(s) tend to increase its credibility at all levels. But what about credibility gaps beyond a single institutional structure, such as, state boards, agencies, and legislative bodies; regional and professional accrediting associations; and external funding sources, both private and governmental? In principle, organizational credibility gaps may exist in these relationships also. In addition, there may be multiple levels of organizational credibility gaps within these organizations.

An example of an additional organizational credibility gap existing in relation to an external funding source was pointed out regarding the funding from a private foundation in Figure 2. A similar point could be made in relation to the state and federal levels in relation to the ESEA Title I program.

The same principle of keeping evaluation functions separated from project management responsibilities could be applied by external funding sources, private and governmental, as a condition for receiving funding. Such conditions have been imposed in some projects, such as the performance

contracts piloted by the Office of Economic Opportuntity beginning in 1970. Some observers have even felt that this is a growing trend with the current push for accountability. It is the opinion of this author that such a trend would be detrimental to the overall substantial develment and institutionalization of evaluation functions in educational institutions. The drive for accountability should not be allowed to overwhelm parallel functions of educational evaluation, especially if alternatives are available for concurrently strengthening accountability as well as the other objectives of evaluation, such as continuous improvement of materials, technology, and personnel. Such a promising alternative seems to be available in the two-stage model as an "internal" evaluation and an "external" evaluation audit (see Stenner and Webster, 1971).

The foregoing description and explication of organizational credibility gaps provides the background for four general propositions which may serve as useful guidelines in the institutionalization of evaluation functions in educational institutions, as follows:

1. Organizational credibility gaps can be delineated in the planning stages of a project or program.
2. In the institutionalization of evaluation functions, organizational credibility gaps should be minimized insofar as other considerations permit.
3. Every organizational credibility gap should be delineated in the planning stage of a project or program and the bridging of each gap should be planned.

4. From the perspective of an external funding agency, the strategy of internal evaluation with external audit provides the best balanced use of resources for a long-range development and institutionalization of evaluation functions in educational institutions.

Proposition One is based on the feasibility of applying the criterion for an organizational credibility gap to the proposed organizational structure of a project or program.

Propositions Two and Three embody two basic proposals for dealing with delineated organizational credibility gaps in project/program planning stages. Proposition Two relates primarily to the placement of the evaluation functions in relation to accountability levels of a project/program. It simply means that consideration should be given to organization, or re-organization if need be, of reporting and control channels in such a manner that these channels will remain separated as far up the organizational levels as may be feasible in the light of other constraints, such as costs, efficiency, and effectiveness of providing evaluative information. If it is judged that at some level these other constraints require the project/program evaluators to be "members of the team," it should be determined how broadly the "team" concept may be construed. For instance, in relation to Figure 2, evaluators assigned to provide evaluative information on the drug abuse education program were regarded as members of the team in the sense that they were still employees of the school district, yet they were still organizationally separate from the operational level of the

program. The balance point between being on the team and yet as organizationally separate as feasible is difficult to judge and delicate to maintain. In fact, the judgment of the balance point may shift with the perspective at different organizational levels.

The strategy of minimizing the existence of organizational credibility gaps minimizes excess effort in evaluation functions. If every organizational credibility gap is to be bridged by some provision (Proposition 3), extra effort must be exerted--extra resources applied. The fewer gaps allowed to exist, the less the extra resources which must be applied.

The alternative may at least theoretically exist to eradicate all organizational credibility gaps by attaching the function of providing evaluative information to the highest level of concern in the project. For instance, in relation to Figure 2, all organizational credibility gaps could be removed from the perspective of the Board of Education if project/program evaluative information were institutionalized as an office or unit staffed by and directly responsible to the Board of Education or by contracting directly with outside firms or agencies to provide the evaluative information directly to the Board of Education. This strategy could be expected to generate considerable resistance by all administrative and operational levels if it became a regular mode of operation. However, the need probably exists today for at least some experimental applications of this model. The opportunity for slanting and censoring is great enough, even when only one credibility gap remains internal to the organizational structure, that some funding agencies

could experiment with this as an alternative model to contracting with a completely external evaluator which reports directly to the funding agency.

Evaluative information is directed toward decision alternatives, but accountability concerns only represent one subset of the decision alternatives. Another important subset relates to the efficient and timely use of evaluative information by various levels of decision makers--from operational level to top funding agency level.

Thus, Proposition Four is a proposal, perhaps even a plea, that commitment of resources to evaluation be based on a strategy that would tend in the long run to build up the "in house" capabilities of educational institutions to conduct quality project/program evaluation as well as to serve the immediate concerns of accountablility at the funding source level. The proposition favors a strategy which would be similar to various ESEA guidelines wherein up to ten percent of the resources may be used for project evaluation and up to two percent for an independent evaluation audit.

A combination of the propositions supports an overall strategy that would support the long-range build up of in house evaluation capabilities of educational institutions, with a careful eye to minimizing internal organizational credibility gaps, and an independent evaluation audit that would bridge the "external" credibility gap or gaps between the funded institution and its funding sources.

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